



Material Presence: The Sacramental in Art

Tyrus Clutter

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

Harold Rosenberg

The theories of art critic Harold Rosenberg led to a perceptible shift in mid-twentieth century art making. His confidence in the creative act, represented in the dance-like Action Paintings of artists such as Jackson Pollock, changed the focus of what art was and would become. With a Pollock painting, one gained a sense of the artist's physical process during the creative act. As Rosenberg stated, "The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life." This focus on the event paved the way for a certain expectation that artworks should be somewhat active or even participatory in nature.

This participatory characteristic of art was not actually a new, revolutionary concept, however. Western art is steeped in traditions of this very kind. Christianity, in both the East and the West, was built on the practice of interactivity within the arts. The Mass or Liturgy is participatory, set up in a format of call and response. The modes of ritual, still evident in one form or another in all Christian worship traditions, initially arose out of the sacramental traditions—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican.

It is little wonder that a residue of the ritualistic, sacred, and participatory has been attached to much of the art of the last century. Most of the artists working in the second half of the twentieth century were not yet part of what has recently been called a post-Christian society, wherein the majority of the culture is no longer rooted in the language and assumed beliefs of the Christian faith. Several celebrated modern and contemporary artists were even reared in environments where the church played a prominent role—for good or ill.

Eleanor Heartney points out in her book *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* that this early immersion in a sacramental system plays a significant role in the art production of many artists. Often, the church's teachings and doctrines are a foil against which the artist devises his or her own doctrinal or theological structure. Rituals and practices of the church make their way, albeit in altered forms, into the work of these artists. As Heartney demonstrates, the physical and bodily elements of Catholic practices make a lasting impact on the aesthetic sensibilities of these artists, even if they do not practice that faith. This is what she refers to as an incarnational aesthetic.

Edward Kienholz was one of the pioneering mid-century artists who chose interaction as a defining element within his work. The scope and scale of his work was such that it transformed how future generations would conceive of and produce artwork. Kienholz created small room-sized spaces—installations—that the viewer actually needed to enter to fully experience. Once inside, the viewer was surrounded by elements that the artist had carefully selected, crafted, and arranged. It was not simply viewing the work but being subsumed by it.

The Wait is one such multilayered piece. The central character in

this tableau is an elderly female figure. Weathered and dusty, her frame is composed of limbs made from large animal bones and a head formed from a bell jar containing an antique photo, presumably of the woman on her wedding day. She sits in a room surrounded by the objects of what once was. The wallpaper is stained from decades of cigarette smoke; the photographs are of loved ones long dead. Her present companions take the form of an attendant parakeet in a birdcage and a taxidermied cat resting on her lap.

Kienholz admitted that death was the predominant theme within his work. Death, in his estimation, is a topic avoided by most people. In *The Wait* he provides social commentary on how we view those close to death. Neglected and forgotten, we shun the elderly, as they are an all too present reminder of our own mortality. Instead of spurring us on to live our lives to the full, gaining all we can from the wisdom of those who have gone before, we ignore the reality of their frail and lonely existence.

The artist's choice of materials in this and other works may have seemed remarkably innovative at the time, but *The Wait* is clearly connected to the sacramental tradition in art. Kienholz was anything but a professing Christian. Although he did have the influence of that faith in his familial background and even briefly attended a Christian liberal arts college in his early years. The use of the bones and photographs in the installation are reminiscent of the practice of veneration of saints through relics and icons within the sacramental tradition.

While some may use the term sacramental interchangeably with the word sacred, there is a distinct difference. All Christian traditions believe in sacraments. The two sacraments shared by nearly all are Holy Communion, or the Eucharist, and Baptism. Others include Marriage, Confirmation, and Ordination. The definition for all sacraments, according to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, is "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace." But it is not simply the number of sacraments that denotes the difference in beliefs among traditions. Those from sacramental traditions believe in the concept of real presence—a doctrine that creates some debate. For believers within these traditions the elements of Communion are not merely a visible symbol of Christ's sacrifice and their participation in the corporate Body of Christ, but "a sure and certain means by which we receive that grace."

The impact of a belief in an analogous presence in works of art once provided as much division in the Christian faith as the concept of real presence in the Eucharist. The debate over the acceptability of icons as "windows into eternity," through which the living could request the intercession of saints who have gone on before, was a primary objective for the conveners of the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. This ecumenical council upheld the long tradition of icon veneration, stating:

We define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images... should be set forth in the holy churches of God... and in pictures in houses and by the wayside, by wit, the figure of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ... of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artis-

above, left to right: **Cynthia Gusler**, *PEZbird*, Taxidermied bird and PEZ candy dispenser with acrylic clear coat, 6"x 1.5"x 5" Photo by Steven D. Johnson
Craig Goodworth, *Triduum*, Performance Video Still, 2008, Courtesy of the artist



tic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature.... For the honor, which is paid to the image, passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented.

If the Council upheld the creation of physical images of Christ on the basis of Christ's introduction into the created order, through his physical incarnation and full human nature (as well as full divine nature), how does that impact our understanding of art in a sacramental framework? In the bodily resurrection of Christ, God, through the Son, eternally remains physical—material, yet glorified. God's Word (i.e. Christ) spoken to us through the material of human flesh, set a precedent for how the Spirit continues to reveal the very nature of God through material items. Jesus himself is the one who instituted this doctrine through the sacrament of the Eucharist. We come to God the Father through the physical person of God the Son.

Outside of the enduring reverence paid to icons and their prototypes, it might seem that there is little evidence in contemporary artwork that points to this sacramental quality. Even Heartney concludes that many artists tend to glorify their perceived contradictions within Catholic doctrine more than their agreements with other aspects of it. When religious motifs make appearances in modern and contemporary art they are more apt to raise controversy due to their seemingly sacrilegious motivations and materials than anything else. One of the contemporary art world's most celebrated and controversial artists, Damien Hirst, provides a suitable example.

References to Christian themes and symbols within Hirst's work are typically explained away as his personal attack on archaic beliefs and modes of religion. What art world insiders seldom observe is that Hirst's work is infused with Christian symbols and that, even at its most ironic, the work possesses an earnest questioning of faith. The artist recognizes that if we dispose of religion the big questions of life are still looming before us. His focus on materials places him squarely within a sacramental scheme.

A former Catholic, Hirst generally refers to himself as an atheist. When his work stands alone certain pieces tend to invoke a skepticism of Christian faith. Paired with some of the revealing statements found in interviews given over a period of about a decade (*On the Way to Work*, with Gordon Burn, 2001), one senses a larger tension in Hirst's work. A Hirst exhibition at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts in 2005 inadvertently made some of these connections more clear.

Away From the Flock, a pristine white lamb in a glass vitrine filled with formaldehyde, brought forth plenty of biblical associations, even without such a blatant title. The wall text for this particular piece included the following Hirst rumination:

I always think that art, God, and love are really connected. I don't want to believe in God. But I suddenly realized that my belief in art is really similar to believing in God. And I'm having difficulties believing in art without believing in God.

The term which Hirst does not quite verbalize here is faith. Within the same exhibition was a work from Hirst's series of *Pharmacy* installations, in which the artist places faux medications, either pills or packaging, within glass cabinets that recall the rows of products found in a pharmacy. Again, the wall text provides insight into the artist's process and the role of faith within his thinking:

I was having a lot of conversations with my mum about my art... she had a completely closed mind about it. 'Well, what's it for?' And there was no way of explaining it. And I was with my mum in the [pharmacist's]; she was getting a prescription and it was like complete trust on the one level in something she's equally in the dark about...As far as I could see, it was the same thing..."

A pattern starts to emerge when we look at the abundance of pieces that reference pharmaceuticals. In the West, and especially in North American society, we have welcomed every new drug that makes us more like we want to be, using them to prolong life so that we can, seemingly, live forever. At least we can look and feel younger, even if we cannot completely escape death. The implication of these pieces is that we have put our faith in technology. We put our faith in doctors, in medicines and the scientists who engineer them. As Hirst's mother does, we blindly accept these things and take them for granted. We ingest them with the faith that we will be transformed—much like the Eucharistic reminder of Christ and the world to come.

Damien Hirst is actually more widely known for his investigations into the endless cycle of life and death. His works utilizing sliced up animal carcasses have repeatedly caused tabloid-style stirs far beyond the confines of the art world. Yet he has become subtler over time and is increasingly questioning if there is something in us that continues on to a next life—something that lasts forever. This question lies within works that, on first viewing, appear to be just a melding of biology and aesthetics. These works are formed by affixing brightly colored butterfly wings in symmetrical patterns to enameled canvases.

The butterfly is an ancient Christian symbol for resurrection. It references both Christ's defeat of the tomb (cocoon) and the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Often, Hirst fully references the death and resurrection of Christ in the butterfly works through the symmetrical pattern created with the wings, which doubles as a cross. While these symbols may escape the casual observer, one need not delve too deep to recognize them. They even bring to mind the putting to death of the old life and celebration of the new life in Christ that is represented in the sacrament of Baptism.

Craig Goodworth, like Hirst, is an artist whose materials could elicit objections of offensiveness and perhaps even the inhumane. Goodworth varies from Hirst as he is working from an active sacramental faith. The rituals of his performance-based video work are rooted in Eastern Orthodox traditions and bound to the natural world. The activities are tied to a rural and ancestral heritage; documented at locations as diverse as Pennsylvania, Slovakia, and the American Southwest. The practices are built upon asceticism with an overriding theme of sacrifice, emptying (purging), and filling.

Mapping Purgation is Goodworth's video journey through a series of rituals that embody this concept of emptying and filling. One particular early segment of this video—*Concrete Crucifixion*—hints at the more sacramental tendencies of the artist. Goodworth emerges from the cool, late autumn air in hooded coveralls. He is on a journey, pushing a wheelbarrow laden with the carcass of a slain deer. His cowed figure is reminiscent of a medieval monk, proposing a fitting comparison with the group of Eastern Orthodox monks who reside in a secluded region of Northern New Mexico, and with whom the artist has spent several months in retreat.

The hooded pilgrim arrives at what seems to be a pyre made from the branches of felled trees. He secures the carcass atop the pyre in an inverted cruciform. One immediately associates the sacrificial parallels to both the Abrahamic tradition and the Passion of Christ. The interesting twist is that this deer has already been gutted. It is not simply left as a decaying stand-in for sacrifice. Instead,

Goodworth counteracts the purgation with a ceremonial filling. He mixes and pours enough concrete to fill the void left in the deer. Once the carcass has fully decayed what will remain is this fullness—the literal volume of the once living elements of the dead beast.

Near the end of *Mapping Purgation* Goodworth performs one of the most tasking and revelatory acts in a three day event entitled *Triduum*. When he discovers the empty and dried carcass of a deer in the desert the artist pierces it with forty or fifty steel rods. The interpenetration of a corpse makes us aware of the way an eternal God, through Jesus, intersected time, space, and humanity. By the time Goodworth finds it, the corpse has already been life giving. In the death of this animal other scavengers were nourished. The analogy is to the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which the body and blood of Jesus become a grace-filled nourishment for his followers.

Traveling to and from the remote location of the beast, bearing the weight of the steel rods is an ascetic practice. It is like the completion of the forty-day purgation of the Lenten season. After the exhausting task of pulling the rods back out of the carcass, Craig documents how they have altered the shell of the deer. Certain views reveal light piercing through the perforated hide. Within the interior—a place of darkness and death—light is now streaming.

This interaction with the natural world is a common motif for those producing art in the lineage of sacramentalism. While Cynthia Gusler's inspiration and media choices are derived more from a socially conscious Protestant faith, they equally exhibit an undeniable sacramental quality. Gusler utilizes craft items and reclaims the cast-off materials of consumerist culture; not resigning them to a state of *disgrace*, but favoring a *graceful* re-creation.

Her geode project provides particularly helpful illustrations. Incorporating reclaimed materials such as the glass from a shattered car windshield and discarded cardboard, Gusler transforms detritus into facsimiles of beautifully encrusted crystal formations. In works that commingle craft and high art forms, these materials that might otherwise be tucked away in a landfill take on a new significance. Instead of polluting the natural world they cause viewers to question their relationship to that world.

In the tradition of holy relics and reliquaries, Gusler transforms the base and lifeless matter of a fallen creation into objects of spiritual contemplation. One might object to the apparently repugnant materials incorporated into some works, questioning their worthiness for acts of sacred contemplation. Considering, however, that most relics are the desiccated bones and body parts of saints seems to quell those reactions.

A consideration of Gusler's quirky hybrid bird sculptures—*birdbrids*—brings the discussion full circle. Again, she revives, resurrects, and repurposes her materials. The artist has learned the craft of taxidermy, which she employs on the broken bodies of small dead birds found in the wild. The birds are often combined with other man-made objects and toys, producing sometimes humorous interactions and dialogues. The finished pieces share the resin-encrusted quality favored in much of Kienholz's work.

Birds conjure biblical associations of messengers or agents of the Spirit. When Gusler perches a small black bird atop a PEZ dispenser she flirts with both humor and the high seriousness of mortality. The PEZ dispenser functions much like the priest when offering the consecrated host. We receive life and nourishment only through the mediator of death.

The same interest in consumerist culture, though in the variant form of commodification, runs through the ongoing *Untitled Projects* of Conrad Bakker. The artist has mobilized a small army of "stand-ins." They are roughly hewn and painted wooden simulacra of products and objects commonly encountered in everyday existence. The sculptures lack the full functionality of their prototypes but are introduced into the marketplace via methods that essentially negate their status as high art commodities. Left on store shelves with their real-life kin, several *Untitled* works retain the role of contemplative objects in anonymity.

Bakker's Reformed background shares a rich sense of symbol with the sacramental traditions. Linking his work more fully to the sacramental is an understanding of the potency of physical interaction with symbolic objects. The *Untitled Project: Dumpster* acts almost like an icon in reverse. This painted wooden object is able to function much like its prototype—a real dumpster. The image receives the *dishonor* of its prototype when it functions as that



object and becomes a receptacle for trash.

Though *Untitled Project: Refreshment [Art Chicago]* is aimed more pointedly at the art market, it bears significant witness to the sacrament of the Eucharist. At one of the major North American art fairs, the artist subversively introduced his project in the guise of a roadside lemonade stand. The alarming nature of a child's entrepreneurial endeavor quickly gained viewer attention, ostensibly out of place amid typical fair booths. Once the illusion was broken the artist "sold" his wooden cups of wooden Kool-Aid to takers for 25¢ each. Challenging the system of valuation, these cups are closer to a gift—freely given and freely received. If we believe there is something "other" that makes art objects different from the common stuff of life, then art is somewhat comparable to that transformative presence which makes the Eucharist far more than mere bread and wine. That otherness of art is at the heart of Damien Hirst's struggle to believe in art without also believing in God. It is a sacramental kind of faith.

Belief in God is not the main concern of performance and video artist Amy Day's work—that is assumed. Her questioning of inherited religious systems is related to Bakker's and Gusler's questioning of consumerist systems. The performative nature of Day's work is similar to Goodworth's. Goodworth, however, is often taking on the role of priest or shaman, through sacrificial acts. Day sometimes references the same Christian concepts but takes a posture that is more humorous and theatrical.

In the performance video *The Duck Queen* Amy strolls along a lakeshore in winter. Her attire at first seems like a formal haute couture gown, but is soon revealed to be a dress fashioned from slices of bread. Alone, amid the Canada geese and gulls, she offers herself sacrificially. She becomes the bread of life. While it is not her actual body that is offered the reference to Christ is undeniable.

The artist's body becomes a fully integral part of the project in works such as *Ritual Obstacle Course*. In the rural fields of Ohio the artist constructed a course in which her bodily interaction revealed its symbolism. She is first found in pristine white clothing and with mime-like white makeup on her face, collecting ceramic vessels from muddy puddles of water. The vessels travel with her through the course and must be utilized in ritual acts at each station to gain access to the next obstacle. The culmination of the course finds the artist bathed—or baptized—below the fount of a rain machine. Her true, unmasked self is washed clean in the spray of the rainwater.

In various stop-action video pieces Day's own physical presence is absent. *Too Calm*, is a type of memento mori. The protagonist figure finds herself menacingly observed by skeletal figures of death. After consuming bunches of grapes, she gives a caesarian birth to a Luke Skywalker action figure. All this while a small toy bunny looks on. This type of complex sacralized visual vocabulary runs throughout all Amy Day's projects. The stop-action pieces take on a more specific sacramental flavor through their various processes. Dead and inanimate objects seem to resurrect and take on life.

Humor, often used to both temper a severe message and elicit viewer response, is incorporated when Day critiques the beliefs of contemporary religious systems. She acknowledges a certain form of faith that allows no room for questioning or doubt. The episodic videos entitled *Bible Bath* (www.youtube.com/user/biblebath) once again finds the artist in baptizing waters. *Bible Bath* plays out like some children's story-time video, though inside a water-filled bathtub. Day plays the host, with a striking resemblance to the androgynous *Bacchus* figure in Caravaggio's painting of the god of wine. She sits in a tub filled with floating clusters of plastic grapes, cradling a glass of wine as she retells somewhat inebriated versions of Bible stories.

Day is at once immersed in the waters of Baptism and immersed in the Word. Surrounded by the grapes and wine of the Eucharist, she



candidly confesses the lessons to be learned in stories about David and Goliath and Noah. The facts may be fuzzy and the analogies skewed, but the belief is earnest. She silently ponders the biblical tales as she drains the chalice of wine. She provides multiple options for the viewers, forcing them to question the nature of their faith.

With each of these artists, physical materials and physical activity or interactivity are vehicles for deeper reflection. Both rituals, and the objects stemming from those rituals, become the outward signs of some inward implication. Modern and contemporary artists, working in both new and traditional media, have inherited persistent attitudes and an awareness of the art of Western culture. The philosophical structures imposed on art are inseparable from the influence of Christianity on the Western world. Artists are well aware of this as they conceive their works. As viewers, we enter this system, engaging the art with a belief in its transcendence. Acknowledging a faith in the otherness of art allows us to graciously receive something far more valuable than what rests on the surface.

Tyrus Clutter is an artworld chameleon. With an MFA in painting, he works mainly in printmaking and assemblage constructions. Aside from creating artwork he is an arts administrator/teacher/lecturer/critic/curator/writer. His writing on contemporary art and the creative process is located on his blog and can be found through his website: www.tyrusclutter.com.

left: **Craig Goodworth**, *Triduum*, Performance Video Still, 2008, Courtesy of the artist

above, right: **Craig Goodworth**, *Concrete Crucifixion*, Performance Video Still, 2008, Courtesy of the artist